Jackie Robinson
(1919-1972)
Baseball player, activists

Honored internationally as the central figure in baseball's "Noble Experiment," Jack Roosevelt Robinson, known in the world of baseball as Jackie Robinson, took the first steps toward integrating the sport's major league teams when he signed a contract to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. This gigantic stride, which prepared the way for the legendary feats of Willie Mays and Henry Aaron, was an early harbinger of the significant changes in contract negotiations, compensation, and general status of professional athletes addressed half a century later in the 1994-95 baseball strike. His individual challenge to the accepted policies of organized sports demonstrated that change was possible through the concentrated effort of a player's union.

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Jackie Robinson was born in Cairo, Georgia, on January 31, 1919. His parents were Jerry Robinson, a plantation farm worker, and Mallie, a domestic worker. There were five children in the Robinson family: Edgar, Frank, Mack, Willa Mae, and Jackie. Frankhis youngest brother's greatest fanand Edgar are no longer alive, but Mack and Willa Mae still live in Pasadena, California. Mack, Robinson's early role model, a worldclass sprinter, came in second to Jesse Owens in the 200yard dash in the 1936 Olympics. Jerry Robinson left his wife and children, never to return, when Jackie was six months old. When she was 30 and Jackie 13 months old, Mallie, a deeply religious woman who believed in the possibility of advancement for herself and her children, set out by railroad to start a new life in Pasadena. Mallie Robinson washed and ironed clothes for welltodo people and had to augment her meager earnings with welfare relief. Money was limited, but Jackie never felt deprived of her love and attention.

Despite the absence of some of the more arduous racial conditions of Georgia, Pasadena had similar restrictionsthe movies were segregated, African Americans could swim in the municipal pool and attend the YMCA only on designated days, and some eating places were closed to black people. From the teachings of his mother, however, Robinson learned important lessons of selfrespect and selfconfidence.

Carl Anderson, a neighborhood automobile mechanic, pointed Robinson in the right direction when the young boy engaged in petty misbehavior with his friends. Karl Downs, youthful minister of Robinson's Methodist church, paced the sidelines whenever his protégé was on the playing field and counseled him when his athletic, social, or academic life became burdensome. Encouraged by his mother and his mentors and by the exhilaration of successes in sports, Robinson turned more and more of his energies to the playing fields.

Introduction to Sports

Robinson's first competitive game took place when his fourthgrade soccer team played the sixth graders. Then came football, tennis, basketball, the track team, and table tennis. In athletics he had more freedom to relate to people on equal terms, with less emphasis on race and more on body development, coordination, and performance level. Because of his skill as a football quarterback, .400 baseball player, and exceptional broadjumper, Robinson was accepted as a friend by white team mates, attended the same schools, and visited back and forth in each other's homes. Still, with added age and broadened experience, Robinson saw that athletic success did not guarantee full freedom in the racially and economically unequal American society. Opposing players often reminded him of his race by rougherthannecessary hits, arguments, and racial slurs.

Robinson won letters in football, baseball, basketball and track at Muir Technical High School and Pasadena Junior College. When he left the latter in 1939, he declined attractive offers from universities nationwide and chose the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), just an hour's drive from his mother's home in Pasadena. Robinson's honors at UCLA were impressive: for two years highest scorer in basketball competition in the Pacific Coast Conference, national champion long jumper, the school's first athlete to letter in four sports, AllAmerican football halfback, and varsity baseball shortstop. He left college in 1941 because of financial pressures, not many units from a bachelor's degree.

Directly after UCLA, Robinson worked for a few months as an athletic director in the National Youth Administration, in Atascadero, California. Driven by a growing, overwhelming desire to play professional sports, Robinson went to Hawaii in the fall of 1941 to join a semiprofessional, racially integrated football team, the Honolulu Bears. On weekends he was a member of the team, and during the week a construction worker. At the end of the short season, he returned to the United States in December 1941, right after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that took the nation into war.

In 1942, Robinson was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to a segregated unit in Fort Riley, Kansas, where under existing policy he could not enter Officer's Candidate School. After protests by heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, then stationed at Fort Riley, and other influential personsincluding Truman Gibson, an AfricanAmerican advisor to the secretary of warblack men were accepted for officer training. Upon completion of the course of study, Robinson was commissioned as a lieutenant in 1943.

A racially charged incident at Fort Hood, Texas, threatened to discredit Robinson's service record, when in defiance of a bus driver's command to go to the rear of the bus, he refused to leave his seat. Robinson, a lifelong teetotaler and nonsmoker, was charged, originally, with public drunkenness, conduct unbecoming an officer, and willful disobedience. With a public outcry by fellow service men, the NAACP, and the black press, led by the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender, the court martial ended in exoneration. However, instead of going to meet with black soldiers in the European Theater of Operations as he desired, Robinson's next assignment was athletic director to new recruits at various camps in this country. He left the service in November 1944 with an honorable discharge.

For a while Robinson coached a basketball team at what is now HoustonTillotson College, in Austin, Texas, but the genesis of his professional baseball career came in 1945, when he signed with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro American League for $400 a month. In this league, which included such luminaries as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and "Piper" Davis, Robinson was treated with reverence because of his overall playing skills, speed, and batting average that approached .400.

Major League Contract

Even though playing with the Monarchs had the hardships of long, uncomfortable bus rides from town to town, uncertain awayfromhome accommodations, low pay, poor playing fields, and the humiliation of the prevailing discrimination and segregation, this was the perfect springboard for Robinson's debut into the major leagues of baseball. It was the arena where he attracted the attention of Branch Rickey, who opened the door for him.

Before he decided on Robinson, Rickey, a devout Christian, and president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, had searched nationwide for the ideal African American man, one talented enough to play on major league teams and wellenough adjusted within himself to withstand the attacks sure to come in the racially prejudiced setting. Rickey had scouted Robinson with the Monarchs and was impressed enough to meet with him for a personal assessment.

Rickey interrogated Robinson extensively for three hours on August 28, 1945. In a dramatization of hotel, restaurant, and game situations, he glared at Robinson, shouting demeaning words and phrases while observing his reactions. At the end he quoted the Biblical passage that advises turning the other cheek. Satisfied that Robinson met the tests of ability, stamina, and tolerance, Rickey exacted a promise of extreme patience and forbearance for three years, then offered him a contract. On October 23, 1945, Rickey made the historic announcement that Jackie Robinson, a black man, would play for the Montreal Royals, the minor league affiliate of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Satchel Paige gave a ringing endorsement of Robinson as the best possible selection for "The Noble Experiment."

In the midst of the 50th celebration of Robinson's debut as a Dodger, former players spoke publicly of votes by most National League teams whether to go on strike when the black man took the field. Had it not been for the leadership of Rickey, National League President Ford Frick, Baseball Commissioner Albert B. "Happy" Chandler, and players like Stan Musial, the course of professional baseball might have taken a different turn.

In the winter of 1946, while Robinson was playing with Montreal, he married Rachel Isum. They met as students at UCLA. Her greatest interest was her future as a registered nurse, his a career in professional sports. Because Rachel was not an avid sports fan, nor initially overwhelmed by the attention of a college super star, it took some time for the relationship to develop. They were married six years after the initial introduction. A year after his death, Rachel Robinson founded the Jackie Robinson Foundation to provide motivational and financial support to minority students and maintain an archive of material relating to his career. She lives in Connecticut, still a major force in the foundation's success.

Robinson Jr., the oldest of their children, born in 1946, was killed in an automobile accident in 1971. Sharon, born in 1950, is a midwife, living in Stamford. Her brother, David, two years younger, operates a coffee farm in Tanzania, East Africa.

At the end of one year with the Montreal Royals, the Brooklyn Dodgers brought Robinson up from the minors to open the 1947 season. The team won the league title and Robinson finished with a .297 batting average, a leagueleading 29 stolen bases, and the title of Major League Rookie of the Year.

After Robinson had kept silent for the agreed time, he began to speak up when pitchers narrowly missed his head, fans shouted epitaphs, or obscene mail came to his home. He fought the denial of equal service in eating and sleeping quarters, or wherever he faced discrimination. Finally, the curative effects of time and recognition of Robinson's value to the team caused the majority of players to settle into the spirit of cooperation. With Robinson on the roster, the Dodgers won National League pennants in 1947, 1949, 1952, 1953, 1955, and 1956. In 1955 they defeated the New York Yankees in the World Series.

When the Dodgers decided to trade Robinson to the Brooklyn Giants after the 1956 World Series, he retired from the game, declining to join his team's archrivals from the same city. It was a fitting time for the star to leavewith a .311 lifetime batting average, and 197 stolen bases over his career.

Robinson's induction into baseball's Hall of Fame in 1962 was a cause of celebration for black people around the world. He chose his wife, Rachel, his mother, Mallie, and his friend, Branch Rickey, to flank him in the Cooperstown award ceremony. This highest possible recognition of Robinson's skill and service was a symbol of victory to African Americans in the continuing struggle against injustice, proof that black Americans are as capable as any others.

Robinson's Hall of Fame plaque records the highlights of his brilliant career. With the Brooklyn National League 1947 to 1956, he was the leading National League batter in 1949 and holds the fielding mark for second baseman, playing 150 or more games with .992. He led the National League in stolen bases in 1947 and 1949 and was named Most Valuable Player in 1949. He is joint record holder for most double plays by second basemen, 137 in 1951. He led second basemen in double plays from 1949 through 1952.

After Professional Baseball

After baseball, Robinson headed the personnel office of the New Yorkbased restaurant chain, Chock Full O'Nuts. He took an active role in the Harlem YMCA and other social and community organizations, and was a key figure in establishing and nurturing Harlem's African Americanowned and controlled Freedom Banknow defunctthrough its initial period in the mid 1960s. Despite black America's pride in Jackie Robinson's strength as a trail blazer, his exceptional performance on the baseball diamond, and his high visibility in community efforts, he was not free from controversy or from disagreement with other popular African American figures. While Robinson had deep affection for rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and felt the

pain of his suffering, he knew that his own temperament was not suited for King's nonviolent demonstrations. He preferred to volunteer time as head of fund raising drives for churches in Georgia destroyed by arsonists.

Robinson embraced King's dream of equality but used an issue of his syndicated newspaper column that appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly in the New York Post and the New York Amsterdam News, to air his disagreement with his stand against the war in Vietnam. King telephoned Robinson and explained his motivation for the opposition. After their long talk, Robinson had not been persuaded to accept King's stance but understood why King, a champion of nonviolence in our South, could not condone armed conflict in Asia.

To Robinson, civil rights advocate Malcolm X was a talented man with a message of promise for African American youth but hampered by a philosophy based on hatred. In a much publicized war of words the two men feuded over Malcolm's characterization of Ralph Bunche, former undersecretary to the United Nations, as a man muzzled by white people who had put him in that position. Robinson defended Bunche's integrity, and Malcolm X criticized successful African Americans who distanced themselves from the struggle for equal rights. Malcolm X's and Robinson's goals were identical, but their approaches took divergent routes.

At one time Robinson resigned from the NAACP, citing its failure to listen to younger, more progressive black people. Nevertheless, he was labelled an "Uncle Tom" by black militants who resented what they interpreted as Robinson's identification with a conservative, affluent white society.

In 1949 the House UnAmerican Activities Committee subpoenaed Robinson to rebut singer, actor, and political activist Paul Robeson's declaration that African Americans would not support this country in a war with the Soviet Union. In his autobiography, I Never Had It Made, published shortly before he died, Robinson defended his 1949 testimony that he would not desert his country based on "a siren song sung in bass." He disavowed the phrasing, which he then saw as an insult to the older, wiser Robeson, a hero to the people for whose causes he had made meaningful sacrifices.

Robinson's political alliances were unlike those of most African Americans who shied away from the Republican Party. He campaigned for Democrat Hubert Humphrey in the presidential primary, yet he chose Republican Richard M. Nixon over John F. Kennedy in the 1960 general election. When Robinson compared his observations of the two candidates for president long after the election, he regretted he had not chosen Kennedy. During the campaign, Nixon was friendly and charming in private meetings, and seemed interested in the civil rights of African Americans. Robinson saw no tangible evidence of Nixon's sympathy for the struggle in the South. On the other hand, when Robinson met Kennedy, he wondered whether the Democrat's failure to make eye contact as they talked was due to an unspoken prejudice. Robinson's fears disappeared with the news of Kennedy's public objections to the persecution of Martin Luther King. Robinson came to the belated conclusion that Kennedy was the better man.

New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a Republican, named Robinson Special Assistant for Community Affairs in 1966, with the responsibility of improving the governor's popularity

among residents of Harlem. In response to criticism, Robinson defended his membership in the Republican Party as a way to make heard the otherwise ignored voice of black opinion.

In protest against baseball's failure to add African American managers and front office personnel, Robinson declined to participate in the 1969 old timers game. Three years later, he came to Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles for ceremonies to mark the 25th anniversary of his first major league contract. By that time the effects of heart disease, diabetes, and failing eyesight were apparent. Still a handsome, proud man, nattily dressed in a business suit, his hair was totally white, and his gait was noticeably slower.

Jackie Robinson's last public appearance was on October 15, 1972, at Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati, when he threw out the first ball in the 1972 World Series. Nine days later, rescuers were unable to revive him from what would be the fatal heart attack that struck when he was 53-years old in his Stamford home on October 24, 1972. His funeral was held on October 27, 1972, at Riverside Church in New York. The pallbearers were all sports figures: Ralph Branca, Larry Doby, Junior Gilliam, Don Newcombe, Pee Wee Reese, and Bill Russell. On its way to Cypress Hills Cemetery, the procession passed through Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant where thousands lined the route. They were paying tribute not only to Robinson's athletic abilities, but to him as the symbol of opportunities for African Americans in professional sports without limitations of race. He had withstood the pains and frustrations of the trailblazer while giving recordbreaking performances on the field of play, leaving lasting encouragement to players who followed long after he retired.

Source: *Notable Black American Men*.